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## A STUDY OF JEREMIAH. II.<sup>4</sup>

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THE years which followed the Deuteronomic reformation were years of much religious enthusiasm, and to outward appearance of great religious progress. All over the land, the heathen abominations were swept away, the groves and pillars and images destroyed, and the pure worship of Jehovah re-established. The people of Judah seemed at this time to be really the people of Jehovah. But Jeremiah soon saw that the reformation was a failure. It had all along been merely external; it had never touched the hidden springs of the nation's life. The people had, indeed, obeyed the letter of the law; but they remained uninfluenced by the spirit of the covenant. Even while they worshipped Jehovah with tumultuous joy, their hearts were far from him; and their moral lives were glaringly inconsistent with their professions. For some years the prophet seems to have remained silent, out of all touch with the party of reform, yet not definitely breaking with them. But at last the crisis came. Thirteen years after the reformation (607 B. C.), when the kingdom of God seemed to have been at length securely established under Josiah, the good king fell in battle against the king of Egypt. This disaster at one blow dashed the people's hopes to the ground. It seemed to them the divine condemnation of the whole reforming movement, and, therefore, they turned back, in full reaction, kings and priests and people, to their old ways.

Against this strong tide of reaction, through the whole of the dark and disastrous reigns of Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah to the day of Jerusalem's destruction, Jeremiah stood alone, the ambassador of Jehovah to his rebellious people, declaring his will with the most passionate earnestness, but

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meeting only callous indifference, or persistent and desperate opposition and persecution.

In the course of this calamitous period we find Jeremiah involved in various conflicts, which throw into clear light the contrast between true and false religion, patriotism, and prophecy.

1. As early as the first year of Jehoiakim's reign (607 B. C.), the prophet comes into sharp conflict with the official representatives of religion. In that year a great feast was held in the temple. The people, by this time recovered from the blow of Josiah's death, had regained their former confidence in Jehovah and his temple; and their festal refrain resounded: "The temple of Jehovah, the temple of Jehovah, the temple of Jehovah, is this." But the prophet's harsh notes struck discord into their joyful chorus. "Trust not in lying words, saying: 'The temple of Jehovah, the temple of Jehovah, the temple of Jehovah, is this;' but amend your ways and your doings: for only so will I suffer you to dwell in this place" (7:3 f.). "If ye continue to steal, murder, and commit adultery, to swear falsely, to burn incense to Baal, and walk after other gods, the while ye come and stand before me in this house, and say, 'We are safe from all evil;' if ye make this house, which is called by my name, a den of robbers in your eyes, then behold I will do unto this house which is called by my name, wherein ye trust, and unto the place which I gave to you and your fathers, as I have done to Shiloh. And I will cast you out of my sight, as I cast out your brethren, even the whole seed of Ephraim" (7:9-15).

This conflict between Jeremiah and the priests and people—continued with more or less intensity during all these dark years—marks the contrast between true and false religion. The sin which the prophet denounced was not strictly irreligion, or definite rejection of Jehovah. The people were full of a certain, almost fanatical, confidence in Jehovah; and they were outwardly devoted to the service of his temple. Their sin was rather lifeless ritualism, combined with easy-going moderatism. They believed in Jehovah as a friendly God, well-disposed to his neighbors Baal and Chemosh and Moloch, and gentle with his people in their weakness. They imagined that he took delight

in sacrifice and burnt-offering. They believed that, if he received these, he would tolerate their lax morality. And they felt sure that, so long as they rendered him his due offerings, he would never forsake them. Against this ritualism of worship and laxity of belief and conduct Jeremiah vindicated the spirituality and righteousness and holiness of Jehovah. He was a jealous God, who would have no other God before him; a righteous and holy God, who hated iniquity and punished transgressions. He had no delight in the multitude of their offerings. What he desired was the sincere worship of the heart, manifested by goodness of the life. If his people did not render him the dues of truth and honesty and purity, then, in spite of all their professions of faith, and all their sacrifices of blood and treasure, he would cast them off forever from being his people.

2. In the temple scene, above alluded to, the rulers of Judah had defended Jeremiah's life against the attacks of the priests and people. But the prophet was soon involved in as deadly conflicts with the kings and rulers. About the beginning of Jehoiakim's reign (607 B. C.) Nabopolassar, king of Babylonia, captured Nineveh and utterly destroyed the power of Assyria. Three years later (604 B. C.) his son Nebuchadrezzar crushed the forces of Pharaoh Necho, of Egypt, at the world-historic battle of Carchemish. When the young conqueror should naturally have made good his victory by marching southward through Judah to Egypt, his father Nabopolassar died, and he retired in hot haste to Babylon. At this turn of events, Jerusalem became delirious with joy. Nineveh had fallen; Pharaoh Necho had been crushed, and Nebuchadrezzar had been turned back from Jerusalem. It seemed a clear manifestation of the hand of Jehovah.

But again the "words" of Jeremiah struck a note of harsh discord. He saw in Nebuchadrezzar "the hammer of Jehovah," "the servant of Jehovah," who should wreak his vengeance on Judah. From this moment the burden of his prophecy is: "Behold, thus saith the Lord: Because ye have not heard my words, I will send unto Nebuchadrezzar, king of Babylon, my servant, and will bring him against this land, and

against the inhabitants thereof, and I will utterly destroy them, and will make them an astonishment and a hissing and perpetual desolation. Moreover, I will take from them the voice of mirth and gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the sound of the mill-stones and the light of the candle, and this whole land shall be a desolation and an astonishment, and they shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years" (25:9-11). And the prophet's counsel to king and people, steadfastly declared in the face of the fiercest persecution, during all these years of Judah's lingering death-agony, was: "Surrender to the king of Babylon, for only so shall you save your souls alive."

This conflict between prophet and king marks the contrast between true and false patriotism or politics. To the people of Judah the kings who offered so stubborn a resistance to the hosts of Nebuchadrezzar were the patriots, while Jeremiah who counseled surrender was openly denounced as a traitor. These sentiments are shared by not a few among moderns. Renan, *e. g.*, dubs Jeremiah a "fanatic," an "anarchist," who defied order and triumphed over the downfall of his people, a "furious declaimer, who never sacrificed one grain of personal enmity to the good of his country." But Jeremiah was a true patriot. His, indeed, was the truest patriotism. The kings' patriotic interests were confined to the mere petty politics of Judah. Jeremiah sought the best, the eternal interests of his people: their religious and moral welfare. He yearned, like Paul, to bring them back to Jehovah and to righteousness. And he would have given his own life for his country's salvation. He showed his sterling patriotism in this, that even in the darkest hour of Judah's ruin, when everyone else had despaired of the land, he was strong in hope of her salvation. In the most critical time of the siege of Jerusalem, he redeemed his family inheritance in Anathoth, as the pledge that "houses and fields and vineyards should again be bought in this land" (32:15). And he steadfastly declared that Judah should yet rise from her ashes to a new and better life.

3. In the course of these years, too, Jeremiah fought many a fierce battle against the professional prophets of Judah. The

most dramatic of these is the conflict with Hananiah (chap. 28). Jeremiah brings three charges against these prophets: (1) Traditionalism. The professional prophets harped continually on the same string, repeating what former prophets had declared, and "stealing Jehovah's words every one from his neighbor" (23: 30), instead of hearkening to Jehovah himself, and from his never-failing treasury bringing forth "things new and old." (2) Time-serving. Their constant refrain was: "Peace, peace." "They say continually unto them that despise me: 'The Lord hath said, ye shall have peace,'" and unto everyone that walketh in the stubbornness of his own heart they say: 'No evil shall come upon you'" (23: 17). And (3) actual immorality. "In the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen an horrible thing: they commit adultery, and walk in lies; and they strengthen the hands of evil-doers, that none doth refrain from his wickedness; they are all of them become to me as Sodom, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem as Gomorrah" (23: 14).

We have here clearly defined the contrast between true and false prophecy. The false prophet was the literalist, the traditionalist, or rigid conservative, who clung to the ways of his fathers, refusing to advance in the spiritual knowledge of Jehovah; the moderate, who preached the false gospel of easy morals and comfortable peace, and himself followed the doctrine he taught. The true prophet was the progressive, who drank of the living wells of divine revelation, and thereby constantly advanced in the knowledge of Jehovah's mind and will; the earnest moralist, who preached righteousness and truth, and himself sought to walk in Jehovah's ways.

The course of events fully vindicated the truth of Jeremiah's prophecy. In the reign of Jehoiachin, Nebuchadrezzar had captured Jerusalem and deported the king and the best part of the people. Undeterred by this calamity, and in defiance of Jeremiah's warnings, the next king, Zedekiah, revolted against his over-lord. Once more Nebuchadrezzar descended in fierce wrath against the ill-fated city. After a desperate siege, the strain of which was relieved only for one brief moment when the Babylonian troops were marched against the king of Egypt, the would-be

savior of Jerusalem, the city was captured, the temple reduced to ashes, and the main body of the people carried captive to Babylonia.

The prophet shared the fate of the remnant of Judah. One of the company which gathered around Gedaliah, he was carried in the wild exodus of the people to Egypt. We hear him once more striving to turn the people from their idolatry and impurity — but in vain. “We will not hearken unto thee. When we burned incense to the queen of heaven, and poured out drink-offerings to her, we had plenty of victuals, and were well and saw no evil. But since we left off, we have wanted all things, and been consumed by sword and famine. Therefore we will do what seemeth good in our own eyes” (44:16-19). Here Jeremiah passes off the stage of history. Tradition says he was stoned to death by the frenzied Jews—a victim to the persecution he had all his life endured.

The character of Jeremiah has been variously estimated. Of late years it has become the fashion to decry the prophet. “The weeping prophet” the apostle of culture terms him, while the word “jeremiad” has stereotyped the popular conception of his character. We have quoted above the contemptuous judgment of the apostle of Parisian politeness. More just, we think, was the verdict of his fellow-countrymen, who regarded Jeremiah as the purest prophetic type of the Messiah, and of the early Christians, who saw in him the express image of Jesus Christ.

Jeremiah, it is true, is no commanding spirit, no kingly character, like Isaiah; no unbending denouncer of woe, like Amos. He is more of kin to Hosea, the sad prophet of the North, sensitive and self-distrustful, one who would fain have shrunk from the call of God, and who was tempted time and again to surrender his divine commission. But this very sensitiveness, almost timidity, of character throws into clearer relief the heroism of the man who feared not the face of maddened kings or frenzied mobs, and whose faith in God no failure could move or wrongful persecution shatter. There seem, indeed, to live in him, combined and intensified (as Wellhausen so suggestively brings out), the spirits of Amos and Hosea. Amos’s vehement denunciation

of unrighteousness, and Hosea's passionate sympathy, a burning jealousy for Jehovah and compassionate yearning over Judah. "I am full of the fury of the Lord: I am weary with holding it. Pour it out upon the children in the street, and upon the assembly of young men together" (6: 11). "Pull them out like sheep for the slaughter, and prepare them for the day of slaughter" (12: 3). And on the other hand: "Oh that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slaughter of the daughter of my people" (9: 1). "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is the health of the daughter of my people not recovered?" (8: 22). "Hast thou utterly rejected Judah? Hath thy soul loathed Zion? We acknowledge, O Lord, our wickedness and the sin of our fathers. Do not abhor us for thy name's sake; do not disgrace the throne of thy glory" (14: 19-21).

And the tragedy of Jeremiah's life was that all his passionate zeal for Jehovah was met by cold indifference and contempt, and his keen human sympathy by utter loneliness and relentless persecution. Ewald admirably sums up the pathos of his whole history:

Possessed by the most perfect prophetic spirit, unstained by any perverse tendency, his noblest utterances nevertheless fell fruitless from his lips; his worst forebodings, his severest threats, were vain. Unwearied by any disappointment or catastrophe, he ever collected his energies afresh for simple labor at Jehovah's work; and yet at times bowed down by the overwhelming burden of the age, and the bitter anticipation of the inevitable end of Israel's long course, he almost lost the iron power and confident composure of an ancient prophet, and sank into the energy of despair, even of malediction. Through a career of half a century he preserved and increased in his own person the honor of prophetism; yet its results turned out exactly opposite to Isaiah's; for his labors proved less and less successful, and he himself became more and more unhappy. . . . In Jeremiah the kingdom lost the most human prophet it ever possessed. His heavy sorrows and despair, his noble yet fruitless struggles, and his fall were those of the whole of prophetism, and, so far as prophetism constituted the inmost life of the ancient state, of the state itself. If any pure soul could still have saved the state, that soul was Jeremiah's; but even for this noblest of the prophets the time was now gone by; and the last great prophet, and all the remains of the ancient kingdom of Israel, which had been preserved amid the storms of centuries, were engulfed in a common ruin.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See *Geschichte des Volkes Israels*, Vol. III, pp. 716 f.



We have entered thus fully into Jeremiah's personal character and experience because they form the real key to the understanding of his prophetic and religious significance. More truly than in the case of any other prophet, except perhaps Hosea, the religious thoughts and influence of Jeremiah were the direct outcome or evolution of his personal character and experience. And, in particular, it was the tragic element in his life that carried him to the highest pinnacle of prophetic inspiration, and led him, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit of revelation, to transcend, while he comprehended, the spiritual conceptions of the earlier prophets, Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah.

1. In Jeremiah the conception of God becomes completely universal. The evolution of history made this step inevitable. Isaiah's conception of Jehovah's transcendence and holiness was already, indeed, absolute; yet for him, and his successor the Deuteronomist, Jerusalem and its temple remained as the center of Jehovah's worship, which must remain inviolable while all else perished. But now Jerusalem lay in ruins, and the temple had been consumed by fire. Three courses, therefore, were open:

a) To renounce the very basis of Israel's worship, viz., faith in the power and favor of Jehovah, and fall back on the worship of other gods, or on blank irreligion and despair. This was the course that the bulk of the exiles followed.

b) To seek salvation in ritual and external ceremonies, the non-essentials of religion. This course the false priests and prophets followed.

c) To recognize the facts, and take them into the conception of Jehovah, to free that conception from every trace of national limitation, and maintain his absolute and universal sovereignty. This step Jeremiah took, and thereby marked the true lines for the whole future development of religion.

In Jeremiah's earliest prophecy, when he can at least contemplate the fall of Jerusalem and the temple, we see a glimmering of this deeper truth. As the antitheses of true and false worship, patriotism and prophecy become sharper, the prophet grasps the principle with clearer consciousness. The actual ruin of Jerusalem and the temple confirm the truth of the principle.

Jehovah is no more the God of Israel and Judah, but the God of the universe. The true worship of Jehovah is no more confined to Jerusalem and its temple. The prophet almost sees the full truth that Christ came to declare: "The hour cometh, yea, now is, when neither in this mountain nor yet in Jerusalem shall ye worship the Father; but the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth; for the Father seeketh such to worship him."

The figure of the potter and the clay (chap. 18) most accurately represents Jeremiah's conception of Jehovah. As clay in the potter's hand, so are all nations of the earth in Jehovah's hand. He can mold and fashion them as he will. That is, Jehovah is the prince and sovereign mover in the great drama of world-history. Yet to the prophet Jehovah's sovereignty is quite consistent with human freedom. The nations have their destiny in their own hands, in so far as they have the power to choose between good and evil. We may thus formulate the prophetic conception: Jehovah, the one God, absolute and universal, ruling with the attribute of pure righteousness all the nations of the earth. This is the expression of fully developed ethical monotheism.

2. In Jeremiah religion becomes definitely and fully personal.

This step also was inevitable. Stage by stage, as the conception of Jehovah widened, the circle of divine election narrowed. To the mind of the earlier prophets the covenant was with Israel as a whole. In the prophecies of Amos and Hosea it was confined to Judah. By Isaiah it was limited to the "holy seed," and now by Jeremiah, as the inevitable result of the ruin of the nation, to the individual seeker after God.

It was the personal experience of Jeremiah, however, that gave its peculiar character to his doctrine of personal religion. We have already seen how strongly the personal element came into play in Jeremiah's call, and, further, how the revealing spirit of God became an abiding personal possession in his life. This consciousness of his definite personal relation to Jehovah remained all through the prophet's life. Even the tragedy of his experience brought his personal relationship to Jehovah

into clearer and fuller consciousness; for all his yearnings and struggles and fears and doubts drew him ever closer to the God of his life. Did he crave for the love of wife and children, for the sympathy of friend and kindred? Jehovah was to him "the Friend that sticketh closer than a brother," nearer and dearer than wife and children, friends and kindred. Did men despise and hate him, and persecute him without a cause for righteousness' sake? Jehovah was his refuge and strong tower of defense. Was he conscious of his own utter weakness? Jehovah was his never-failing strength. The more depressing his sense of loneliness, the closer the shrinking soul clung to Jehovah. The wider the gulf that separated him from his people, the stronger grew the tie that bound him to Jehovah. The more utter the failure of his labors and the more hopeless his outlook on the future, the more resolute became his trust and hope in Jehovah. The word he spoke was Jehovah's word. Therefore he found joy and strength of heart when he proclaimed it. The sufferings he endured were for Jehovah's sake. Therefore he endured with patience. The cause he labored in was Jehovah's cause. Therefore he was firmly persuaded that his cause must prevail. He understood not the meaning of all the strange experiences of his life, yet he trusted implicitly in Jehovah's wisdom and love.

We cannot but think of Jesus Christ, who was misrepresented and despised, reviled and persecuted, shamefully entreated and crucified, but who bore with patience because it was his Father's will, and who found in his sufferings the closest link that bound him to his Father.

Jeremiah's, like Christ's, was true faith, deep and strong and abiding, showing itself not in moments of religious excitement and enthusiasm, but in a life of continuous union and communion with his God. Thus Jeremiah is the father of evangelical religion, and the father of true prayer, in which, in Wellhausen's words, "the poor soul expresses at once its overwhelming (sub-human) sorrow and its superhuman confidence, its doubt and despair and undying faith;" and so out of prophecy has issued at the last personal religion.

Jeremiah's conception of personal religion is expressed most fully in his prophecy of the "new covenant" (chaps. 31-33).

The "old covenant" of Sinai and the "renewed covenant" of Deuteronomy having both proved failures, Jehovah is to make a "new covenant" with his people. His covenant, however, will not be like the former covenants, external, legal, and ceremonial, but inward, spiritual, and evangelical. It will consist essentially in a loving personal relation between Jehovah and his believing people. "I will be their God and they shall be my people" (31:33). The postulate of the "new covenant" is personal freedom: God shall no longer visit upon the children the sins of the parents. "In these days they shall say no more: 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.' But everyone shall die for his own iniquity; every man that eateth the sour grapes, his teeth shall be set on edge" (31:29 f.). The religious basis of the covenant is the forgiveness of sins. Sin has created an insurmountable barrier between God and man. But God will remove the barrier: "I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin will I remember no more" (31:34). Finally the outcome of the covenant will be a free and healthy moral life: "I will put my law in their inward parts, and in their heart will I write it" (31:33). The forgiveness of sins does not violate the law. Rather, it establishes the law. For the forgiven sinner will do the deeds of the law, not of constraint, but willingly, for love of the God who has so graciously forgiven his sins. The prophet has here again almost advanced to the Christian standpoint: "For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and as an offering for sin, condemned sin in the flesh, that the requirements of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the spirit" (Rom. 8: 3 f.).

3. The experience of Jeremiah suggests, though the prophet does not definitely teach, a still deeper truth of spiritual religion, the truth which finds its ultimate expression in the Christian doctrine of atonement: salvation by the sufferings of the innocent.

Before the time of Jeremiah the problem of suffering hardly

exists. The earlier faith of Israel was simple: Jehovah rewards the good and punishes the evil. To minds imbued with this primitive belief, the suffering of the innocent was inconceivable. Even in Isaiah there is hardly room for such an idea. The vengeance of Jehovah would fall without mercy on the head of the guilty; but the "holy seed" would pass through the fire unscathed. But in the day of Judah's downfall the innocent and the guilty were involved in one common ruin. The innocent suffered along with the guilty; indeed, even more cruelly than the guilty. Jeremiah himself is a perfect type of the "suffering servant of Jehovah." No other prophet, perhaps no other man before the coming of the Savior, suffered as he did. The common ruin he shared with the people was as nothing compared with the utter loneliness and indifference and hatred and persecution he had constantly to endure. And even these sufferings were more tolerable than his heart-breaking soul-struggles and sufferings, his yearning anguish and fears and doubts.

And what aggravated the prophet's misery was that he had no gleam of light on the meaning and purpose of all these struggles and sufferings. At times his pent-up feelings gave way to bitter questionings and complaints: "O Lord, wherefore doth the way of the wicked prosper? Wherefore are all they at ease that deal very treacherously? And wherefore must the righteous endure all these miseries?" To the prophet's bitter cry there came no response. We, however, with our Christian light, can understand, at least in some measure, why it was he suffered these things. It was his sufferings that drew him so close to Jehovah, and led him to know so intimately the hidden ways of God. Like the Savior, of whom he was so striking a type, he was "made perfect through suffering."

But Jeremiah's sufferings had an outward reference as well. The prophet is nowhere conscious that salvation is wrought through the sufferings of the innocent, yet the truth is clearly suggested through his experience. The innocent suffer; and through their sufferings the sinful are brought back to God. In the exile this idea was very fully worked out, notably in Ezekiel, Job, the exilic psalms, and most explicitly in Deutero-Isaiah.

"He was wounded for our transgression; he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed."

In Jeremiah the truth is nowhere so clearly or consciously set forth. In his prophecies we find only a vague and unconscious feeling after the truth. Nevertheless, the principle is there, time and again striving to find expression. Here we tread on holy ground, for we stand in the presence of the most sacred mystery of our Christian faith. But the great principles of the faith do not grow in the air. They strike their roots deep in the history of the past. Thus it is that the Old Testament revelation contains so suggestive foreshadowings of the perfect truth of Christ. In this principle of salvation through the suffering of the righteous—which constituted so perplexing and almost insoluble a problem for the Old Testament saints—we find the foreshadowing of the cardinal Christian doctrine of the atonement. And we see in Jeremiah and the "suffering servant," as the Jews saw ages ago, the type of Him "who suffered for sins once, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God."

4. Although Jeremiah's "words" are mostly of sin and retribution, yet he is full of hope for the future of Israel and the world.

The sufferings of the captivity and the exile are Jehovah's instruments for the discipline of his wayward people. They will continue for (roundly) seventy years. Then Jehovah will move among the nations, and gather his people from the uttermost parts of the earth. They shall return with singing unto Zion, and shall restore Jerusalem, and rebuild the holy temple (30: 1 ff., *et al.*).

The visible return of Israel to Jerusalem, however, is but the index of the spiritual return of the people to Jehovah, as represented in the prophecy of the "new covenant" (chap. 31), and expressed in the new names for Jerusalem, "habitation of justice," and "mountain of holiness" (31: 23).

When his people have thus returned to him, Jehovah will send his Messiah, the "righteous shoot" of the house of David, who, "reigning as king," "shall execute judgment and justice in

the land" (23:5). It should be noted, however, that Jeremiah has but this one undoubted reference to the Messiah.

The return to Jehovah, moreover, shall be universal. "They shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, saith the Lord" (31:34). The heathen nations also shall come to Jehovah, and shall be built up in the midst of Israel (12:15-17; 16:19-21).

Thus the circle is completed. The divine election has been narrowed to the righteous individual; but through his steadfast endurance and sufferings the whole race is saved.

We have thus seen how Jeremiah has gathered together the scattered rays of prophecy, and focused them in his great conception of salvation through grace. In the succeeding ages the rays once more diverge, here in the line of spiritual prophecy, as in Deutero-Isaiah; there in the line of formal legalism, as in Ezekiel and the priestly writers; and there again in the line of apocalyptic vision, as in Daniel. The rays are finally reunited in the person of Jesus Christ, the perfect revelation of the Father and mediator between God and man. Jeremiah's interest for us lies most of all in this: that he has foreseen so clearly the essential truths of Christianity, and that he stands out, both in person and in doctrine, as the purest prophetic type of the Savior of the world.